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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to develop a strategy for career counselors and researchers to organize data on the influences of the family of origin on the career decision-making process. Utilizing new approaches, counselors can deepen their clients' career planning process by assisting them in comprehending how family background, upbringing, support, and conflict affect career decision-making. With appropriate guidance, clients may be able to engage parents and siblings more frequently as supportive partners in the career counseling process. (Contains 15 references.) (GCP)

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Using the Family of Origin in Career Counseling

by
Robert C. Chope

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Chapter Ten

Using the Family of Origin in Career Counseling

Robert C. Chope

Introduction

Two years ago, I published a paper advocating that career counselors take into account the influences of the family of origin on the career decision-making process (Chope, 2001). To enable counselors to accomplish this, I recommended two new protocols. Revisions of these were also presented at the California Career Conference (Chope, 2002) in Anaheim.

I remain persuaded that career counselors ought to engage their clients in an in-depth exploration of the influence of their family of origin on their career decision-making. Still, there continues to be a dearth of information and research in this area. What is available, unfortunately, hasn't had much impact on career counseling technique.

This presentation is a continuation of my attempts to develop a strategy for career counselors and researchers to organize data on the influences of the family of origin on the career decision-making process. Utilizing new approaches, counselors can deepen their clients' career planning process by assisting them in comprehending how family background, upbringing, support, and conflict affect career decision-making. With appropriate guidance, clients may be able to engage parents and siblings more frequently as supportive partners in the career counseling process.

As I've pointed out before, career counseling is neither personal counseling nor family therapy, but is heavily intertwined with information that is frequently deeply personal and connected, developmentally, to family of origin influences (Chope, 2000). Several authors illustrate the point. Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen (1996) chronicled that in two generations of her family there are three nurses and nine physicians; as a little girl she thought, "You become an adult and a doctor as part of the same processs." Mary Jacobsen (2000) wrote how the dreams of parents, often-unattained dreams, shape the career choices of their offspring. And Wendy Wasserstein pointed out that the judgments of parents can be brutal. When she won the Pulitzer Prize for the "The Heidi Chronicles," her mother pined that she wished that she were celebrating Wendy's wedding (Aron, 2003).

How Oakland And Jack London Fit In

Many of you undoubtedly hear stories about relatives who "missed their calling" because the family didn't support them. Let me share one more short story drawn from the writing of San Francisco Chronicle reporter, Tyche Hendricks (2003).

Jack London, Oakland's heroic writer and the namesake of the city square, had a checkered career path. From an early age he worked out of his home to help his widowed mother. By the time he was 15, he was a fisherman and, reportedly, an unscrupulous but successful "oyster bed robber." A young political radical and socialist, Hendricks notes that he was recognized for his cracker barrel philosophizing against "injustice and poverty." Being a voracious reader, he spent hours in the local libraries while his formal public schooling was purportedly uneven. Leaving town and heading north at 21, he participated in the Klondike gold rush of 1897, failing miserably. He returned home after 16 months, virtually broke. Still, from that experience he began penning his thoughts about his adventures.

Oakland at the turn of the century was a hostile environment that offered few career opportunities. Terribly frustrated, Jack applied to work at the local post office. But his mother stepped up and insisted that he turn down the job. She felt that he was a gifted writer and needed to be enticed and supported to continue writing. So, with her encouragement, he chose to disregard "the sure thing" and instead made the risky choice of organizing and editing his papers from the gold rush. Within two years he was writing for the Atlantic Monthly and in 1900 Houghton Mifflin published his first collection of stories. By 1903, Hendricks reports, he was the "wealthiest literary figure of his time."

Many career counselors are unfortunately inattentive to information about their clients' families. This attitude may be due to a number of issues: the inability of the counselor to intertwine personal and familial issues with career issues, the lack of an established standard for counselors to follow in assessing the role of the family in the process, and the paucity of any training in addressing family issues. Further, interns in college career centers report that they're typically discouraged from discussing personal or family issues with their clients.

This presentation recommends a shift in the use of the family of origin in the career counseling process and proposes a refined strategy for gathering the information.

Research At Recognizing Family Influence

Historically, career researchers have suggested that the family be given

more focus in career and life planning. Ann Roe (1957) was among the first career theorists to study the role of the family in career decision-making, focusing, with mixed results, on child rearing determinants of career choice. She posited that people are inculcated with two basic orientations, moving toward or away from people in their work interests and occupational selection. These orientations were affected by parental attitudes and parent-child interaction.

Subsequently, the "attachment theory" of Bowlby (1982), drawn from family systems theory, gave career counselors more license to explore the influence of family members in career and life planning. Recently, there's been some very interesting work linking attachment styles to Holland's personality types (Johnson, Thompson, McCrudden & Franklin, 1998). It appears that insecurely attached people appear to be more realistic, conventional or investigative, while more securely attached people represent the range of code types.

Lately, Yolanda van Ecke (van Ecke, Chope, & Emmelkamp, 2003), in exploring preliminary data on Dutch immigrants, has hypothesized that insecure Dutch immigrants are realistic, investigative and conventional while the more secure immigrants are more enterprising with some representing the entire range of code types. Artistic immigrants appear to be unresolved in their attachment relationships.

This new work suggests that perhaps Ann Roe was onto something after all and that attachment material might be useful in career counseling. There may indeed be connections between the experience of our early relationships with our parents and siblings and our later career interests and choices. Attachment theory may be one of the important variables that links family history to the development of interests.

Others (Bratcher, 1982; Ulrich and Dunne, 1986) have added that career change be understood in the context of family dynamics, family values and religion. Quite clearly, most of us are aware that rigid family rules can prevent any of us from taking risks or trying new ventures. Interestingly, some rules may have an effect that is the opposite of what was intended. Alan Fleicher, the father of the former press secretary to President George W. Bush, referring to his son said, "I guess if Ari were to rebel, being a Republican is better than being on drugs, but not by much." Unlike his son, Alan Fleicher was a lifelong Democrat.

Clearly, certain family attitudes and values can adversely affect the career decision-making process. Career indecision is, perhaps, the result of individuals not receiving much support for the choices that they made in earlier development. Young people who were neglected, reprimanded, physically or emotionally abused often have terrible difficulties when they make important life decisions.

In college career centers, counselors report how emotionally demanding

it is for students to take majors that are in conflict with the expectations of their parents. Countless liberal arts students decry how they disappointed their parents by not pursuing something economically practical.

Family influence can also impact older adults. Certain clients have reported significant depression due to the fact that their parents hadn't really ever approved of their career choice. A colleague told me recently that he had been haunted for over thirty years by his father's lack of approval of his enrolling in the Peace Corps.

The Genogram

Even though several authors have suggested the incorporation of family influence into the career counseling process, their impact has been limited because they didn't add any new counseling techniques in this area. No protocol existed to make the information gathering and utilization processes easy.

The career genogram (Okiishi, 1987) was an early remedy for this dilemma and career counselors were given a well defined technique that could be easily used to explore the influence of the immediate and extended family. The genogram also allowed for the exploration of current as well as historical, multigenerational career development patterns. The roles, behaviors, and attitudes of family members along with unfulfilled goals that specific family members had can be explored with this tool.

Family patterns of all types can be easily identified and aligned with the pressures of not measuring up to certain family standards. With a genogram in front of them, career counselors can develop new clinical perspectives and ask new questions.

There are many places where the family can be very useful in garnering up biographical data about the client as a child and sharing that information. Parents as well as siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles can play a role in this. It may be useful for the client to seek information from a parent about a past event like being taken to work on National Sons or Daughters Go to Work Day.

Families of origin and extended families can give a rich perspective to a client's particular strengths and weaknesses. In making a career choice, bouncing ideas off different family members sharing a common ancestry gives an uncanny, genetic view of what people in the shadows of the client have experienced. The National Career Development Association now recommends a greater use of family stories to talk about the unfolding of career choices.

Today's Families Are Quite Complex

Just as we're beginning to incorporate the family into career counseling, we're undergoing revolutionary changes in the structure of the family. Traditional patterns of work and family don't fit into some of the current patterns of career choice, easily studied in the genogram. Increases in the number of two-earner families, as well as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender families illustrate the point. Domestic partnerships are slowly being legally recognized. Single adults are raising children in record numbers. Grandparents have become primary providers in numerous urban settings. And, more than a few parents are raising children in their second and third marriage or relationship. Genograms from these families can seem daunting to construct and interpret.

The traditional family, with delineated roles of provider and nurturer, is difficult to find. The workplace is also changing. There is an immense amount of instability in the workplace. Dot coms have become dot bombs and the current economic recovery appears to be "jobless." Even the concept of "career" is in jeopardy as portfolio careers and project-driven work become commonplace.

A New Protocol

Using variables from my own professional experience, I offer the following new protocol for counselors to use in gathering information about the impact of the family on career decision making. Because of helpful comments and feedback from colleagues, I collapsed the two protocols developed last year into a new one consisting of six primary questions. The protocol certainly continues to be a work in progress. But it offers a strategy for organizing and understanding data on the influence of the family in career decision making. It consists of the following questions:

1. What kind of career information did the family provide?
2. What tangible assistance was provided and were there strings attached?
3. What type of emotional support did the family provide?
4. Was the client concerned about the impact of the career choice on the family?
5. What disruptive family events affected the client or other members of the family?
6. What were the actions of family members who were asked to help and actions of those who were not asked to help?

Each question invites a different type of exploration, as the following will illustrate.

QUESTION 1. What kind of career-related information did the family provide? Several follow-up questions can be added to this first one. Did the family help the client generate different possibilities and new experiences? What alternatives did the family suggest regarding schools, training or careers?

The projected fantasies of the family often far outweigh their information base. It's always interesting for college and high school advisors to watch family members at a high school college information and advising night. Frequently, the family will try to steer their offspring toward those people, schools or programs that they feel are the best for their child. Career counselors should determine whether there was any "forced guidance," opinions given without the consideration of the child.

Counselors should also be aware of the family's impressions of particular roles that men and women played in the workforce. Men who choose to be paralegals or nurses frequently embarrass some traditional parents because they perceive these roles as distinctively feminine.

Finally, what career information came from family tradition? Did the family ensure that only particular schools or career paths would be followed because that reflected positively upon the status of the family? I've had many clients who came from small-and medium-sized family businesses who did not want to pursue these endeavors. Yet the family hammered them with evidence that involvement in the business would be economically prudent as well as beneficial for the family.

QUESTION 2. What tangible assistance was provided and were there any strings attached?

Clients tell me regularly that their parents made an unsolicited offer to pay for graduate school as long as the client went to the graduate school or program of their parent's choice. The counselor should be aware of the emphasis the family placed upon the role of money in life and culture and whether money was used to "blackmail" a client.

QUESTION 3. What type of emotional support did the family provide? The counselor can also follow up with another question: Who was supportive and who was not?

What the counselor should know is how certain the client was that emotional support would be given, no matter what the client chose to do. It's important to appreciate if the family took a "hands off" but supportive approach to the client's decision-making. Sometimes clients report, "My parents just wanted me to be happy." But was that emotional support or

pressure?

It's conceivable that the family chose not to be involved because they were uninterested in the career pursuits of their children or had preconceived limitations of what any of their children would amount to. The counselor should uncover this.

It's also important to find out whether the family attempted to dissuade the client from a particular plan. Families can be quite self-serving. For example, a business owner who wants a child to enter business school may resent the fact that the child wishes to pursue filmmaking. An Asian client of mine had to make the rugged choice of not obeying her parents by pursuing a degree in art when the family wanted her to major in accounting. She felt that her education was living a lie. Eventually she received her degree in art, but only after she enrolled in and failed her first year accounting course two times. She felt no emotional support from the family.

On a related issue, the family perspective may be enormously helpful emotionally. These are the times when issues of culture and diversity can be explored. Some family members who have suffered the humiliation of discrimination and prejudice may be called upon to give a perspective on how to confront these issues today.

QUESTION 4. Was the client concerned about the impact of the career choice on the family?

Some clients want input from their families in order to consider the ramifications that their choice will have for all of the other members of the family. This can lead to harmony in the family. But it can also lead to negative self-talk years later that had the client not always looked out for the family, he or she may have had a more satisfying career path.

Two years ago, I worked with a surgical resident who said that his parents always wanted him to be a doctor and would have been heartbroken if he had chosen another path. But his younger brother and sister resented his receiving so much attention and family resources. The brother and sister felt cheated that they had to do without so that their older brother could finish medical school. The irony is that after the death of his parents, my client was considering leaving the practice of medicine.

The case shows how clients with siblings may choose to discuss issues of fairness and birth order. The surgical resident perceived the family very differently than his siblings. He felt it was unfair that he had so few choices; his siblings felt he took all the attention. In contrast to the above, a first child who attended college when the family had fewer resources may feel put out when compared to younger siblings who weren't asked to contribute as much to their educational and career-related costs.

QUESTION 5. What disruptive family events affected the client or other members of the family?

Clients should explore any disruptions such as geographical moves, unemployment, changes in marital and economic status, catastrophic regional disasters and the like that affected the career development of their parents. Counselors should determine how these childhood disruptions might have affected the career development of their clients. Disruptions can also influence what clients remember about their childhood learning. I've counseled many children of military personnel who uprooted themselves a number of times during their childhood and regret that they never seemed to develop close friends. This later affected their capacity to network well.

Some clients are terrified of making a bad decision. They may especially fear making a mistake in a work world that's marked with so much turmoil. Accordingly, they may usher in the family to develop another perspective on the their career path, to serve as a safety net. Many believe, often wrongly, that with the family's perspective they could make better predictions. Clients may seek familial advice because they're afraid of bringing shame upon the family for a career choice that's inconsistent with the family's culture.

Using the family in this way may be a reflection of the client's own self-doubt. Clients are often afraid of pursuing their own uniqueness and thus will take a safer path generated by the family. They also have some tendency to compare themselves to others and need the family to help them to believe that they will measure up in a competitive job world.

QUESTION 6. What were the actions of family members who were asked to help and actions of those who were not asked to help? Then there is a follow up question: Of those who were involved, which were welcomed and which were not?

This question is framed using two categories from Phillips, et al., (2001): actions of people who want to be involved in the client's process, even if they are not asked, and recruitment of people the client wants to ask to help.

Family members do become involved in the career development process of others even when they're not asked and career counselors ought to probe about the kind of unsolicited involvement the family offered. These data allow for determining where pressure was placed on the client about family rules of order and tradition.

There is also a further question. Of those who were asked to help, who offered assistance and who did not?

Career counselors need to be sensitive to the manner in which the family responded when the client asked for assistance and to determine the level

of support. Certainly the family may respond for self-serving reasons. Counselors can also use this information to determine how independent the client's decision-making is. Some clients have a history of never making any decisions independently. Others use consultation sparingly. But clients usually have good reasons to recruit other family members for advice and the counselor should know these reasons.

So Where Can The Family Help The Most?

There are a variety of places where the family can assist the client in the career decision-making process. Here are four to remember.

First and foremost, the family can listen more and judge less. The family can also help by becoming less focused upon traditional measures of success. They can help the client to define success with respect to what matters most to the client as long as the client acts responsibly.

Second, family members can help with difficult issues like whether a portfolio career might be more appropriate than a single full-time job. Learning about the stories and examples of other family members who have had these alternative choices can be very useful. Supportive family members can help to impart new information to clients, material that the client may be oblivious to.

Third, where appropriate, the family can support risk-taking and new ventures as the client explores alternative career paths. Knowing the past history and career stories of the family, there should be support for pursuing uncharted paths. The family might help the client to "think beyond the box" and serve as a creative "sounding board."

Fourth, good family discussions should be seen as beginning models of the networking process. This family networking process adds to the social integration of the client and can be a model for how he or she can do this with non-family members. A supportive family will teach the possibility of forging new connections and networks. Drawing from Roe and Bowlby, those clients who have developed a sense of connectedness and partnerships through family networking are in a better position to develop stronger social connections and potential employment networks. The family, by example, assists with this and can work to maintain new and developing relationships to help the children.

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